



The Power of Youth

I officially joined the ReThink Health UCRV team in June of 2015, but I feel like I have been here in spirit for a long time. I began my journey as a research scientist in 2005, after obtaining my Ph.D. from Dartmouth in Molecular and Cellular Biology. My life's mission was to help find a cure for cancer. After years of laboratory research, I became convinced that the best way to cure any disease is

prevention. I began to *re-think health*.

The next step in my journey was to serve as the cancer prevention and education director at the Norris Cotton Cancer Center (NCCC), where my goals were to (1) **translate science into public language** to be able to effectively communicate the importance of prevention; (2) **mobilize people to take charge of their own health**; and (3) **encourage people to instigate policy change** in order to improve our health as a community.

Historically, the most powerful social movements have been driven by young people, who can uproot social norms, influence elections, and drive policy changes. I experienced this “aha” moment about **the power of youth** after working with a group of students at the Hartford Area Career and Technology Center (HACTC) in 2013. This interaction inspired me to leverage the energy and passion of teenagers to tackle two major public health challenges facing our region and the nation: obesity and tobacco. (No public health issue in the U.S. is as dire as obesity, given its prevalence of 35 percent and its connection to many chronic diseases, and tobacco use remains at 20-30 percent among people of low socio-economic status.)

So, in 2014 we launched the Mobilizing Youth for Healthier Communities program. The goals of the program are to (1) **educate youth** about obesity, tobacco, nutrition, and physical activity; (2) **promote healthy choices among youth**; and (3) **arm them with research and advocacy skills** that they can employ over their lives as engaged community members.

Over the past year, students learned how tobacco advertisements directed at youth and proximity to tobacco products in retail outlets has been correlated with youth's likelihood to initiate smoking. Working in groups, they developed strategies to mitigate youth exposure. Next year, they will approach community stakeholders to influence voluntary change and adjustments in related public policies.

The students also learned essential information about nutrition and obesity, and explored research that showed access to healthy foods and space to be active are critical to good health. Their own research and action plan involved evaluating their school's food options and making a proposal to the school board about offering healthier choices. Next year, they will map out food outlets and recreational opportunities, including safe routes for walking. Based on their findings, they will develop community improvement strategies and meet with local leaders to negotiate adoption of their strategies.

Measuring Success:

We used pre- and post-surveys to measure the following:

- Students' knowledge of the subject matter.

- Change in students’ physical activity, eating habits and food choices.
- Initiation, exposure, and use of tobacco.

Results:

- Students’ overall knowledge about harmful effects of 2nd and 3rd hand smoke significantly improved. This new knowledge resulted in change in behaviors such as avoiding contact with smokers and asking friends and family members to quit or smoke outside.
- More than 50% of the students increased their weekly activity level.
- More than 85% of the students reported learning many valuable lessons about healthy nutrition and lifestyle. Here are a few of their comments:
 - “It’s better to eat healthy and exercise because if you’re not healthy how are you going to take care of others?”
 - “I want to exercise more and eat more healthy.”
 - “I learned about 3rd hand smoke. I also really liked the snacks that we ate.”

In my new position as Manager of Measurement and Evaluation at RTH UCRV, I am excited to be bringing this project with me. I am optimistic that by educating youth about the issues, training them in advocacy skills, communications, and negotiation, we will empower our future generation to promote and engage in more positive health behaviors.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, I want to thank **ReThink Health UCRV** for welcoming me and for adopting this project, **Mobilizing Youth for Healthier Communities**, in its infancy. I cannot think of a better place to nurture this infant into maturity, where our mission is to **catalyze, connect, and support collaborative work and learning to achieve measurable and sustainable improvements in health and health care.**

Some partner organizations

UV HEAL (Upper Valley Health Eating Active Living)
 Breathe NH
 Regional “sending” schools
 Local farms stands